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## **FINAL ACCEPTED PEER REVIEWED MANUSCRIPT:**

### **Christianity in Roman Britain**

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The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain

*Edited by Martin Millett, Louise Revell, and Alison Moore*

Oxford Handbooks Online

### **Abstract and Keywords**

Although there is limited evidence for pre-Constantinian Christianity in Roman Britain, it is clear that in the fourth century ad the early church became increasingly widespread, partly owing to the influence of the Roman state. The archaeological evidence for this includes personal items bearing potential Christian imagery, possible liturgical fonts or basins, church structures and putative Christian burial traditions. The wider relationship between Christianity and contemporary pagan religious traditions are explored, and this chapter reviews this surviving material evidence and draws out evidence for regional variation in the adoption of Christianity. More generally, some of the wider practical and methodological issues involved in understanding the archaeology of Roman Christianity in Britain are examined, considering how easy it is to unproblematically identify evidence for Christian practice within late Roman Britain. Keywords: Roman Britain, Christianity, ritual, religion, belief, burial, churches

### **Introduction**

The study of early Christianity has tended to assume a rather peripheral position with regard to the wider study of ritual, religion, and cult behaviour in Roman Britain. It is often dismissed as a relative latecomer to the religious landscape of the province, with its true importance developing only in the early Middle Ages. The wider debate about its importance is often couched in the terms of 'success' or 'failure', judgemental terms that are rarely used in discussion of other Roman religious traditions, such as mithraism. It also often implied that the spread of the church in Britain was far less extensive than in other part of the Empire, although often these comparisons are with very different parts of the Empire, and often with different periods (for example, comparing fourth-century Britain with fifth- or sixth-century southern Gaul). While a proper understanding of Roman Christianity certainly presents some specific interpretational challenges, the often over simplistic comparisons between Christianity and other religious traditions in Roman Britain often ignore some of the wider conceptual issues presented by the archaeological study of religious conversion. This chapter attempts to provide a brief overview of the extant evidence for the early church, but also hopes better to position Roman Christianity in its temporal and social landscape in fourth- and fifth-century Britain.

### **Early Christianity**

In AD 313, with the Edict of Milan, Christianity finally achieved full recognition as a licit religion within the Roman Empire. Although it was not until AD 380 that Theodosius issued the Edict of Thessalonica making Christianity the state religion of the Empire, its adoption by the House of Constantine meant that from that point onwards it became the de facto official cult of the Roman Emperors (excluding a brief return to paganism under Julian). During the intermittent persecutions suffered by the church in previous centuries there was a pressure on the church to maintain a relatively low profile within Roman society. It is likely that only in Rome and some of the larger towns of the east Mediterranean were there congregations of significant size. This had the consequence that the church was slow to develop a distinctive set of architectural forms, and there was relatively little Christian public monumentality (Snyder 2003). This is not to suggest that there was no investment in

Christian material culture, but it tended to be artistic endeavours limited to spatially controlled spheres, such as the burial catacombs in Rome or the third-century house church at Dura Europos (Baur and Hopkins 1934; Bowes 2008). In both cases, the Christian symbolism is largely confined to wall-paintings, a cautionary reminder of the extent to which evidence for pre-fourth-century Christian worship may have been lost. The practical impact of the Edict of Milan was the emergence of the church from the shadows, as the newly confident institution had both the legal right and, increasingly, the economic resources to develop a high profile within Roman society. For the first time it could invest extensively in large-scale public expressions of faith, while, at an individual level, it was only then that it became safe to identify oneself as a Christian through personal items of material culture. This new freedom is reflected in both the increase in textual sources for Christianity in the fourth century, and also a massive rise in the quantity and distinctiveness of Christian art and architecture.

It is not surprising, given this major change of circumstances, that the church groped for new ways of expressing its identity, and that, owing to the relative lack of existing Christian modes of representation, it drew more widely on forms and symbols used by other religious and social groups. For example, although the basilica became one of the dominant forms of church plan, it was an architectural blueprint that was widely used by existing secular and religious groups. This relationship between Christian modes of worship and pagan religious life is one that will be returned to at the end of this chapter.

### Documentary Evidence

Contemporary documentary evidence for pre-Constantinian Christianity in Roman Britain is limited. Although Christian communities in Britain were mentioned by early church writers, such as Tertullian and Origen (Thomas 1981: 43–44), these occur within very general passages expressing the geographical extent of the church. As such, these mentions need to be accepted with caution as *prima facie* evidence for Christianity in early Roman Britain. There are, though, hints from later textual sources that there may have been some Christians in second- and third-century Britain. The early sixth century British writer Gildas refers to the martyrdom of Aaron and Julius at Caerleon, the site of a Roman legionary fortress (*De Excidio* 10.2), although it is not clear from where he was drawing his information (Knight 2001). However, it is clear that he derived his information on the martyrdom of St Alban from an earlier *Passio Albani*, possibly dating to between AD 430 and 480 (Sharpe 2001). There has been considerable debate about the dates of the martyrdoms of Aaron, Julius, and Alban; given the paucity of evidence, it is not possible to reach firm conclusions beyond a broad third or early fourth-century date.

The records of the Council of Arles, called by Constantine in AD 314 to settle the Donatist dispute, is the earliest clear evidence for a formally constituted Christian Church in Britain (Rivet and Smith 1979: 49–50). The *Acta Concilii Arelatensis* lists the British delegates:

*Eborius episcopus de civitate Eboracensi provincia Brittania*  
*Restitutus episcopus de civitate Londiensi provincia suprascripta*  
*Adelphius episcopus de civitate Colonia Londiniensium*  
*Exinde Sacerdos presbyter Arminius diaconus.*

[Eborius, Bishop of the city of York of the province of Britain.

Resitutus, Bishop of the the city of London of the above named province.

Adelphius, bishop of the city of *Colonia Londinensium*,

Furthermore, Sacerdos the priest and Arminius the deacon.]

(Munier 1963: 15, ll. 54–58)

The first two names record the presence of bishops in York and London. The identification of *Colonia Londiniensium* is less certain; Lincoln and Colchester have been suggested, with the former the more likely. If the bishops listed represent the church leadership in three of the four provinces of Roman Britain (York—Flavia Caesariensis; London—Maxima Caesariensis; Lincoln—Britannia Secunda), it is possible that Sacerdos and Arminius may have been delegates from the fourth province, Britannia Prima, which perhaps lacked a bishop at this point. British bishops were clearly well integrated into the wider Christian Church in the fourth century, and they are recorded at church councils at Serdica (AD 343) and Ariminum (AD 359) (Thomas 1981: 121). There were also external interventions into the running of the British church. Victricius, bishop of Rouen, crossed the channel at some point in the AD 390s to deal with an unspecified dispute (*De Laude Sanctorum* 443–444). Beyond this, there is very little explicit textual evidence for fourth-century Christianity in Britain, although the careers of some administrators clearly indicate that they were Christian—the late fourth- or early fifth century *vicar* of the diocese, Chrysanthus, became a Bishop of Constantinople, a post that had earlier been held by his father (Salway 1981: 407–408).

This gives us a picture of a Romano-British church with a developed ecclesiastical leadership who were active in church affairs beyond the confines of its own diocese. However, we know little about the extent to which this leadership changed and developed over the fourth century. While the evidence from the Council of Arles indicates that there was a hierarchy at provincial level, it is not clear whether the named individuals were metropolitans with subsidiary bishops, possibly at *civitas* level. The names of bishops have been tentatively identified as inscribed on a number of artefacts, including a silver dish (the so-called Risley Park lanx) that mentions a bishop named Exuperius; a lead salt-pan from Shavington, which records a possible bishop by the name of Viventius, and, less certainly, an unnamed bishop on a pewter bowl from the Isle of Ely. In none of these cases is it possible to localize their spheres of influence (Clarke 1931; Johns 1981; Johns and Painter 1991; Penney and Shotter 1996).

### **Christianity and Material Culture**

There is evidence for the use of Christian imagery on a wide range of objects and artefacts from Roman Britain. However, it is not always easy to move from the simple identification of a symbol with Christian associations to an identification of it as an object connected to Christian belief or practice. This knotty problem can be seen most clearly in the use of the *chi-rho* symbol. This basic symbol, bringing together the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos*, had clear Christian associations from at least the early fourth century, and was regularly associated with Constantine's vision on the eve of the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. The image appears in two forms in Britain, the 'Constantinian *chi-rho*' and the simpler *rho*-cross (lacking the *chi*, but with a cross against the vertical stroke of the *rho*). The motif is found alone, but also regularly flanked by the Greek *alpha* and *omega* (an allusion to *Revelations* 1: 8). The 'Constantinian' *chi-rho* is more common in a Romano-British context, with the *rho*-cross beginning to appear only in the later fourth century (Thomas 1981: 86–91; Pearce 2008: 197–201). The *chi-rho* can regularly be found on objects of indisputable religious or ritual function, such as the votive leaves from the Water Newton treasure (Painter 1999).

However, following the Edict of Milan, the *chi-rho* quickly became associated with emperors in general and the House of Constantine in particular. It is regularly found being used in seemingly official contexts during the fourth century. The most widespread example of this

was on coinage, particularly bronze *nummi* minted in Amiens by Magnentius in the mid fourth century (Moorhead 2000). It also appears stamped on pewter ingots (examples have been found in London) and a silver ingot found in Balline, County Limerick, Ireland, but of Roman origin (Ó Ríordáin 1947: 43–53; Mawer 1995: 96–98). In these cases we seem to find the *chi-rho* being used as an indicator that the ingots came from mines under some form of imperial control. A small lead seal with a *chi-rho* from the forum Silchester may have been used in a similar manner (Joyce 1881: 363). The symbol is also found on a number of personal items, including a group of finger rings (Fifehead Neville, Dorset; Thruxton, Hampshire; Richborough, Kent; Bagshot, Surrey) (Middleton 1881–3: 68; Engleheart 1922: 215; Cunliffe 1968: 98–99; Graham 2002). It is not possible to identify their owners, although the items could clearly have been used by private individuals, state functionaries, and members of the ecclesiastical establishment.

Christian imagery may also be found on other items, such as a group of buckles, belt fittings, and strap-ends of a type likely to have been used by state officials, including members of both the army and the imperial civil service. The *chi-rho* does not appear on these items—except for a strap-end from Sandy, Bedfordshire (Mawer 1995: 65); instead they carry images of peacocks, which had associations with Christianity in Late Antiquity: examples include the belt buckles from Pen-y-Corrdyn, Clwyd; *Tripontium*, Warwickshire; Stanwick, North Yorkshire; and East Challow, Oxfordshire (Sanderson 1993: 2; Hawkes 1973: 145–159, figure 3.1; Collingwood Bruce 1880: 90, figure 8; Henig and Brown 2003). While this general form of belt buckles is widely found in the western Empire, the use of the opposed peacock motif does appear to be a feature found almost exclusively in Britain, with only one other example known, from Westerwanna, Germany.

These items were all made from copper alloy; there are few examples of the use of more precious metals in items with a possible Christian identity. The exceptions are the large silver buckle from the Traprain Law hoard and an unusual bow brooch of doubtful authenticity from Shepton Mallet (Johns 2001). However, a series of far more extravagant groups of objects with a probable Christian association has been recovered from fourth-century contexts as elements in high-value silver hoards. The assemblage with the most extensive range of Christian symbolism is the Water Newton hoard (Painter 1977). This consisted of twenty-seven silver objects and a gold disc, including sixteen votive leafs and a range of cups, jugs, and other vessels. One cup carried the inscription INNOCENTIA ET VIVENTIA ... RUNT (Innocentia and Viventia dedicated/offered?) and a *chi-rho* flanked by an alpha and omega, while another bore a short text accompanied by a *chirho* that has resonances with elements of early liturgy (Painter 1999). The hoard probably dates from the second half of the fourth century, and it has been argued that this may have been a collection of ecclesiastical plate and ritual items, although the reason for its deposition is unclear. The hoard from Traprain Law also had a significant component of artefacts with Christian imagery, including the buckle already mentioned, a strainer with a *chi-rho* design, a silver flask with biblical imagery, and a silver flask with a *chi-rho* (Curle 1923; Painter 1999; 2010). Although the circumstances for its assemblage and deposition were doubtless very different from the Water Newton hoard, both groups attest to the potential wealth that could be amassed by Christian communities in Britain. Christian imagery was also found, on a smaller scale, in other major plate hoards from Britain, including ten spoons adorned with the *chi-rho* from the early fifth century Hoxne hoard and two spoons decorated with a *chi-rho* from a hoard found in Canterbury (Johns and Potter 1985; Johns 2010). These large silver hoards with Christian components are part of a wider fourth-century tradition in Britain of silver hoards, with others, such as the Thetford treasure, containing only pagan imagery (Johns and Potter 1983). However, they are reminders that both pagan and Christian communities

in late Roman Britain were able to amass substantial wealth in the form of silver plate on a scale largely unparalleled elsewhere in the Empire at this period.

*Figure 1.* Silver ring with early Christian symbol (anchor and fish) from the Roman fort at Binchester, County Durham. © Durham University.

In addition to the use of the *chi-rho*, a range of other early Christian images are known from Romano-British objects, such as the combination of fish and anchor found on the intaglio of a silver ring discovered in 2014 excavated at the Roman fort at Binchester (County Durham) (Figure 1).

### Churches

Despite clear documentary evidence of an established Christian Church in fourth-century Britain, the archaeological evidence for this is variable. The most problematic area is in the identification of church structures. There is not a single building of Roman date that can unequivocally be identified as a Christian church, although there are around a dozen structures that have a greater or lesser degree of circumstantial evidence. One of the major challenges is that, as noted above, the most common ground plan for churches in the western Empire in the fourth century was the basilica, a form that was also widely used in other religious and secular contexts. It is not easy, in the absence of additional evidence, to identify a structure as a church on morphological grounds alone. In the absence of an extensive late Roman tradition of epigraphy, and the generally poor preservation of most of these structures, good supporting evidence is largely lacking.

*Figure 2.* Potential Roman church from Silchester, Hampshire. Based on Frere (1975: figure 1). © David Petts.

One of the strongest candidates for a Roman church is the earliest of a sequence of structures on the site of the medieval parish church of St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln (Steane 2006: 129–211). This was located above the central area of the forum of the Roman town. Beneath the medieval church were three earlier structures. The earliest was a rectangular building aligned west–east with a potential rectangular apse at the eastern end. Above this was a larger timber structure with a substantial eastern apse. Although the western end of neither of these buildings was found, it is possible that they abutted the western portico of the forum, which may have acted as a simple narthex. Above this was a smaller rectangular building with a central burial of probable middle Saxon date. The dating evidence for this sequence is not precise, with the first two possible churches belonging anywhere between the very late Roman and the middle Saxon period on stratigraphic grounds (Steane 2006: 192–194). The second building was also surrounded and cut by a series of burials that have a broad seventh/eighth-century AD date, which matches well with the date of the burial within the third structure.

One of the most frequently adduced cases is a small (13 m × 9 m) apsidally-ended basilica in Insula IV at Silchester, Hampshire (Frere 1976; King 1983; Ford 1994; Cosh 2004) (Figure 2). This building lies to the south-east of the town's main forum and basilica complex. Internally, there are two aisles and an eastern narthex with the apse lying at the western end of the structure. Most aspects of this building find parallels with churches elsewhere in the western Empire; for example, the western apse echoes the plan of the early fourth-century church of St Severin in Cologne (Krämer 1958; Frere 1976: 292). However, the major stumbling block for a certain Christian identity for this building is its date. It almost certainly post-dates a nearby wooden structure that probably fell out of use in the late third century. If the

probable pre-Constantinian date for this structure militates against identification of the building as a church, then possible alternatives include use as a *schola*.

In an urban context, another reasonable candidate for a church is the large-aisled building of mid-fourth-century date found at Colchester House near Tower Hill, London (Sankey 1998). Although preservation was poor, excavation revealed the north-eastern corner of a basilica structure with double aisles and a short wall marking off the eastern end of the building. This was a significant structure; substantial in size (c.50 m × 80–100 m) with a stone and tile floor. Fragments of marble and window glass were also found, although in secondary contexts. The reconstructed plan of this building shows some parallels with the fourth-century cathedral of St Tecla in Milan and the church of St Giovanni Evangelista in Ravenna (Krautheimer 1986: 84, 184–185). Another possible function for this building is as a granary for the collection of the *annona*, although the evidence for the use of marble in the interior may mitigate against this suggestion. Intriguingly, a recent analysis of the coin assemblage from the structure suggests that the coin loss profile has its best parallels with late Romano-British religious and ritual sites (Gerrard 2011). Within the context of Romano-British towns, these are the strongest candidates for churches, although other suggestions have been made, including the apsidal building at Flaxengate, Lincoln; the Roman building beneath the medieval church of St Mary-de-Lode, Gloucester, and the apsidal structure in the late Roman cemetery at Butt Road, Colchester. All, however, have only limited and circumstantial evidence for their religious use (Colyer and Jones 1979; Bryant 1980; Crummy, Crummy, and Crossan 1993: 164–190; Heighway 2010: 42–43).

There are also a small number of possible Roman churches from rural contexts. The most likely example is the small rectangular structure associated with a group of over forty burials and a possible font from Icklingham, Suffolk (West and Plouviez 1976). The association of the structure with the burials is suggestive, since Roman pagan temples were rarely located adjacent to graves. More important, however, is the fact that three lead tanks carrying overt Christian motifs have been found in the immediate area. While a strong case can be made for the building being a small church or oratory, this identification is again made only on the basis of its contextual associations rather than anything inherent in the form or plan of the building itself. A number of other small rectangular structures found adjacent to Roman rural temples have also been put forward as potential churches, possibly replacing an earlier, pagan, focus of worship, including examples from Lamyatt Beacon, Somerset, Brean Down, Somerset, and Uley, Gloucestershire (Ap Simon 1964–5; Leech 1986; Woodward and Leach 1993). While they all have some features in common with early churches, the strongest parallels are with early medieval rather than Roman churches, and, in the absence of any internal dating evidence for most of these structures, an identification as a Roman church is hard to endorse.

Finally, there are a small group of structures on Roman military sites that may be churches, although, like other examples, they suffer from problems in interpretation. A good case in point is the rectangular structure at the major fort at Richborough, Kent (Brown 1971). Located in the north-east corner of the fort, this part of the site was excavated using relatively unsophisticated techniques in the 1920s. This work revealed two lines of possible stone post-pads, which appeared to form the west and north walls of a structure. The structure is poorly dated, so there would be no suggestion that this was a church if it was not for its proximity to a probable masonry stone font that lay between the structure and the northern wall of the fort.

On the northern frontier, there are a number of potential churches. A simple apsidally ended building was constructed within the courtyard of the *praetorium* at Vindolanda. Dating evidence is sparse, although it was clearly constructed over a build-up of activity that overlay the flagstones of the courtyard; a date of early fifth century or later is most likely (Birley 2009). There is also another small apsidal building at nearby Housesteads (Crow 1995: 95–97). As at Richborough, it lay within the north-eastern corner of the fort, although the apse was at the west rather than the east end. It was discovered during Bosanquet's excavations in the late nineteenth century, and its precise date is unclear, although it appears to be broadly late Roman.

*Figure 3.* Painted wall plaster from Lullingstone Roman villa (Kent) showing *chi-rho* symbol flanked by an alpha and omega. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Slightly different in form is the putative church at the major fort and supply base to the south of the River Tyne at South Shields, Tyne and Wear (Bidwell and Speak 1994: 103–104). This structure lay within the *principia* of the fort and consists of a possible altar surrounded on three sides by a stone structure, which might best be understood as elements of a rectangular apse. This building was quite substantial in size, measuring over 9 metres in width, and there is the potential that the main body of this structure could have been linked to part of the colonnade surrounding the courtyard.

A final form of church that needs to be considered is the 'house church'. The dedication of elements of private houses on a temporary or permanent basis to the celebration of the Eucharist has its origin in the earliest period of Christian practice (Bowes 2008). However, it is apparent that this practice continued into the post-Constantinian era and that some villas may have had what were, in practice, private estate chapels. The best example from this in Britain is Lullingstone, Kent (Meates 1979, 1987). Here, exceptional preservation allowed a series of plaster wall-paintings from an upper room in building to be reconstructed. The anti-room or narthex was decorated with *chi-rhos* flanked by an alpha and omega (Figure 3). Similar symbols appeared within the main room, as did a sequence of figures in the *orans* position (hands raised up), the position associated with prayer in the early church. At the same time as the paintings were created, it appears that the access routes to the rooms were changed and access, which had previously been via the main house, became possible only via an exterior door (Meates 1987). It is salutary to note that, without the survival of the wallpaintings, there is nothing that would have suggested a Christian use or identity to these rooms.

Lullingstone is not the only Roman villa that has produced decorative schemes with a clearly Christian identity. A number of villas from *Britannia Prima* (south-west England) have produced mosaics that incorporate possible Christian symbolism. The best known of these is the central roundel from the large pavement from Hinton St Mary, Dorset, which shows a male head with a *chi-rho* symbol behind it (Pearce 2008). A contiguous mosaic showed hunting scenes and Bellerophon fighting the Chimaera. The male bust has often been identified as an early (if not the earliest) figurative depiction of Christ (Toynbee 1964; Painter 1967, 1972; Thomas 1981). However, there have also been strong arguments made that the image is in fact a piece of imperial portraiture, intended to represent a member of the House of Constantine (Pearce 2008). The *chi-rho* also appears on a mosaic from Frampton, Dorset. As at Hinton St Mary, this was associated with a depiction of Bellerophon battling the Chimaera with the *chi-rho* decorating the adjacent apse (Cosh and Neal 2006: 130–140).



From the evidence for urban, rural, and military churches, it is possible to make a number of general observations. There was the apparent change in the way in which late Roman formal space was being utilized by the end of the fourth century AD. Whether or not one accepts the Christian attribution to the buildings at St Paul-in-the-Bail, Lincoln, Vindolanda, and South Shields, they were all located within the centre of what had formally been open courtyards. There was also a clear move away from architectural expressions of power drawn from Mediterranean architecture, which had an emphasis on courtyards and open spaces. It is also notable how little good dating evidence there is for these structures, which were often excavated with unsophisticated techniques, so that detailed stratigraphic insight is frequently lacking. Even when excavations were to modern standards, the lack of good diagnostic material culture of a fifth-century date makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between buildings that were built broadly in the fourth century and those that were first constructed in the fifth century AD. It is also important to consider the British structures in their wider context. In the western Roman Empire very few churches can be securely dated to the fourth rather than the fifth century, and thus the evidence from Britain is, in fact, broadly comparable with developments in neighbouring provinces.

### **Baptism**

Churches are not the only built structures associated with early Christianity in Britain. A number of masonry structures that may be fonts or font bases are known. While the evidence for the church at Richborough may not be strong, the hexagonal masonry structure to its north is almost certainly a font (Brown 1971). This stone-built basin has strong parallels with other certain examples from Boppard and Cologne, Germany (Brown 1971: 227–228, plate XXXI). An octagonal example, built of tile rather than stone with a gravel drain or soakaway, has been excavated at Chimneys, Witham, Essex; this was found on the site of a Romano-Celtic style temple built in the third century AD (Turner 1999: 51–55). However, it appears to post-date the phase of activity at the temple and may represent the Christianization of a pagan focus of worship. Unlike the Richborough example, there are hints of an external superstructure surrounding the font, with a series of post-holes placed at each corner of the tank; this was succeeded by a later reworking to convert it into a four-post structure.

Another masonry cistern-type font comes from Icklingham, Suffolk, where a small tile-built tank was found close to the possible small church already discussed (West and Plouviez 1976: 71). A final possible example is the small stone-lined tank that stood to the west of the possible church at Housesteads (Crow 1995: 96–97). Although it is rectangular in form, similar simple forms are known from the Continent, such as at Zurzach, Switzerland (Brown 1971: 228, plate XXXII).

In addition to complete font cisterns, there are also a number of potential font bases, the footings or platforms on which smaller tanks could have stood. Tile platforms, on an axial alignment with putative church structures, stood to the east of the small basilica at Silchester already mentioned and to the west of the apsidal structure in the cemetery at Butt Road, Colchester (Frere 1976: 290–291; Crummy, Crummy, and Crossan 1993: 176–177). Obviously, the case for accepting these as font bases is closely connected to the acceptance of the related buildings as churches.

It is possible that some ornamental pools or cisterns from Roman villas may also have had a baptismal or at least quasiritual function. At Chedworth, Gloucestershire, a small apsidal pool to the north-west of the main building was fed by natural springs (Goodburn 2000: 24). Although constructed in the pre-Constantinian period, it may have had a later

Christian use, as a number of *chi-rho* symbols were found carved onto stone slabs that probably originally lined the pool. It has been suggested that a group of octagonal pools from villas in south-west England (Dewlish, Dorset; Lufton, Somerset; Holcombe, Devon) may also have had a similar ritual function (Perring 2003; Todd 2005). They were all located within existing bath-suites but also had separate external access. However, although there is evidence for Christianity on mosaics and other material culture from villas in the general area, this functional identification of the pools must remain speculative (Henig 2006).

An important class of objects is a group of large circular lead tanks some of which carry overt Christian imagery, with over twenty examples known. Circular in shape and constructed from sheets of cast lead, they vary in size from 0.46 metres to 0.97 metres in diameter. A number of these have been decorated with *chi-rho* symbols (for example, Ashton, Northants; Pulborough, West Sussex; Icklingham, Suffolk), in some cases associated with the Greek letters *alpha* and *omega* (Figure 5). Two also carry figural images. A tank from Flawborough, Nottinghamshire, has four figures in the *orans* posture, while the most complex is a figurative frieze on a tank from Walesby, Lincolnshire. Within an architectural frame it shows three groups of figures; the central group consists of two clothed women flanking a naked woman, while the other two groups depict clothed males in cloaks and tunics. This has often been interpreted as the depiction of a baptism, with the naked catechumen being assisted to the font by two supporters (Thomas 1981: 221–225; though see now Crerar 2012). These are usually associated with baptism, despite the more widespread tradition of baptism by immersion, and seen either as fonts or vessels associated with other elements of the baptismal liturgy, such as ritual footwashing (*pedilavium*) (Watts 1991: 171–173). However, solid evidence for their precise function is far from clear. Although a small number of broadly similar lead tanks have been found outside Britain, these have not been found carrying Christian imagery, and they do seem to be a genuinely insular phenomenon.

An important dimension to the distribution of the lead tanks is their specific depositional context. Many appear to have been placed in ‘watery’ contexts, including ditches (Flawborough), wells (Caversham; Ashton), rivers (Pulborough; Oxborough; Huntingdon), and water holes (Heathrow). This appears to parallel a long-term northern European tradition of utilizing such contexts for acts of ritualized deposition. In Roman Britain, particularly, there is a clear tradition of placing hoards of pewter vessels and tableware in similar locations, a rite that becomes increasingly popular from the later third century AD (Petts 2002). There is also evidence for regional focus to this rite, with the deposition of both lead tanks and other suites of items being most common in the East Midlands and East Anglia. This can even be seen scaled down to the local level, such as in the area around Icklingham, which has produced evidence for four lead tanks, as well as a cluster of other hoards, including coins and deposits of ironwork, with evidence that this local tradition had its origins in the early Roman period (Petts 2002).

### **Death and Burial**

As with other aspects of fourth-century Christian belief, identifying a diagnostic Christian burial rite in the late Roman period is challenging. There are undoubtedly major changes in the late Romano-British burial rite from the third century onwards (Philpott 1991; Quensel-von Kalbern 1999; Petts 2004). Broadly speaking, there is a transition from cremation to inhumation as the predominant rite, although within this general pattern there is certainly considerable regional variation.

The inhumation rite is itself far from homogenous, but it is possible to recognize two general traditions. One rite continued to see the deposition of a range of grave goods, including vessels and items of personal ornamentation. These burials were often aligned north–south, and there was considerable variation in the positioning of the body, with some unusual treatments of the corpse, including prone burial and post-mortem decapitation. The spatial arrangement of these burials within a cemetery often showed evidence for clustering in possible family groups or around focal graves. This rite contrasted with a tradition in which grave goods were largely absent. These graves were usually aligned approximately west–east, and the graves within cemeteries were often laid out in regular rows. There is also a tendency for a greater proportion of bodies in these graves to be protected by a coffin, cist, or stone-lining. These two traditions could appear contemporaneously within a single settlement but were usually spatially distinct.

This distinction can be seen within an individual cemetery in the case of Poundbury, Dorset, where the bulk of the cemetery population was aligned west–east and had few grave goods, with a significant number being placed in wooden, stone, or lead coffins (Farwell and Molleson 1993). Within this group were a number placed in stone-lined mausolea with internal plaster wall-painting, some of which may have had Christian symbolism (Sparey-Green 1993). However, at the periphery of the cemetery were smaller plots where the graves were aligned mainly north–south and contained grave goods. At a different spatial resolution, this distinction between the two rites is apparent at Ilchester, Somerset, where the main cemetery to the north-east of the town was dominated by west–east-aligned graves with few grave goods (P. Leach 1994: 91–103). To the south-east of the town, situated in the back lots of roadside buildings, burials characteristic of the other tradition were situated (P. Leach 1982: 82–88).

Though the two rites were clearly broadly contemporary through the fourth century, it is not clear precisely when the west–east aligned inhumation tradition developed. The lack of grave goods means that they are often inherently hard to date. However, at Poundbury the cemetery appears to have been founded in the early to mid-fourth century, while at Butt Road, Colchester, there is clearly a major cemetery reorganization of the burial ground, replacing a more heterogenous tradition that featured a wide range of grave goods and a north–south alignment, at some point in the late third or early fourth century AD (Crummy, Crummy, and Crossan 1993: 4–163; Millett 1995). These changes in burial rite appear generally to have occurred around the turn of the fourth century or perhaps a little later, but it is not easy to show for certain whether these developments are pre-Constantinian or not.

It would be tempting to relate the advent of this burial rite with the spread of Christianity, but the situation is doubtlessly more complicated than this. A major obstacle for such a simple interpretation is the complete lack of any textual evidence for any extensive church interest in defining the nature of the Christian burial rite in this period, with no recorded prescriptions about orientation, spatial organization, or treatment of the body beyond a broad stricture against cremation. However, in the fourth century it is likely that, with the increasing Christianization of the imperial civil service, the church stepped into the gap left by the secular elite's withdrawal from involvement in this sphere and became increasingly involved in civil administration. This would have allowed the church increasingly to control a range of activities, including burial in major cemeteries. This need not mean that all those buried within the formally arranged cemeteries were Christians; many may simply have been conforming to a burial rite advocated by a socially and politically powerful element within Roman society. Those who were not able to come to an accommodation

with this may instead have opted to bury their dead in more peripheral locations. Indeed, the increase of unusual rites, such as post-mortem decapitation, may even have been an attempt to develop more overtly 'pagan' rites in the face of an increasing Christian orthodoxy (for a more developed version of this argument, see Petts 2003: 146–149).

Attempts to distinguish diagnostic evidence for Christian burial are hampered by the lack of overtly Christian epigraphy from fourth-century Britain. This reflects the wider decline in the epigraphic habit in the third and fourth centuries throughout the western Empire (Handley 2001). A number of fourth-century funerary inscriptions have been identified as potentially Christian on the basis of parallels between particular epigraphic formulae used in similar Christian contexts elsewhere in the Empire (for example, *vixit plus minus* found on inscriptions from Carlisle and Brougham; *titulum posuit* found on inscriptions from Hadrian's Wall, Old Penrith, Templeborough, and York) (Handley 2001: 181–183; *RIB* 620, 689, 786-7, 934, 955, 1667). The extent to which these phrases are peculiarly Christian are open to debate, and Knight (2010) has argued for the need to look for broad 'Christian symptoms' rather than direct Christian identity in the epigraphic record. Across the Empire there is a slight increase in the use of epigraphy towards the end of the fourth century and into the early fifth century (Handley 2001: 181–183). There is a small group of late gravestones from the western end of Hadrian's Wall that appear to date from this period; however, it is still unclear whether they belong in a fourth- or fifth-century context, and they have no overt Christian symbolism (Dark and Dark 1996; Todd 1999).

In the sub-Roman/early medieval period there is a clearer revival of funerary epigraphy in the western fringes of Roman Britain and, to a lesser extent, in lowland Scotland (Thomas 1993; Edwards 2001). While these later stones are clearly being erected in a Christian context, they too carry remarkably limited evidence for overt religious belief. There is still some debate over the precise relationship between these later insular inscriptions and the latest Roman examples (Handley 2001; Knight 2010). These insular stones differ from contemporary continental stones in their notable lack of Christian symbols or imagery (for example, *chi-rho* symbols, peacock, or doves).

## Conclusions

The intractable nature of the evidence for Roman Christianity in Britain means that there is very little consensus on its extent during the fourth century. The success or otherwise of the Romano-British church has important implications for understanding the growth of Christianity in western and northern Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries. Some scholarship has regarded the fourth century as a period of consolidation, with a firmly established church within the Roman province forming a springboard for its rapid extension beyond the frontiers of the Empire in the fifth century (e.g. Thomas 1981; Petts 2003). An alternative perspective sees the church in Roman Britain as remaining institutionally very weak and reliant on direct imperial support. As a consequence, the abdication of the political control of *Britannia* by the Roman state in the early fifth century resulted in the final failure of an attenuated church (e.g. Frend 1955, 1968, 1979; Watts 1991). This view then requires that early medieval Britain undergoes a period of reconversion carried out by missionaries from mainland Europe. While the limited nature of the evidence is capable of multiple readings, it is clear from the early documentary evidence that, while the Gallic church clearly had an involvement with the British church, this appears to be in the context of a relationship between two established bodies, and there is no indication of any missionary activity. It is also notable that the earliest significant historic sources written within early medieval Britain situated the island's conversion during Roman rule rather than the post-Roman period.

Nonetheless, it is clear that, despite the likelihood of continuity, there was a major realignment of the geographic focus of the British church, with a probable decline or collapse of the church in the east of the province in the face of Anglo-Saxon takeover. The best evidence for the church can be found in western Britain and southern Scotland, regions that had previously been peripheral to the focus of Roman control. However, such shifts in emphasis must be understood within the context of wider changes in the geography of power in sub-Roman Britain. It is important, though, to emphasize that later fourth-century and fifth-century sub-Roman paganism has been under-researched, and the low material visibility of the sub-Roman church is paralleled in the lack of a diagnostic archaeology.

As well as debates about the extent and nature of continuity, another key area of debate about Romano-British Christianity is centred on its relationship with contemporary paganism. This relationship can be recognized in a number of separate cultural spheres. It is clear from the juxtaposition of Christian and Gnostic imagery on some mosaics that there may have been a positive interaction between the church and the more literate and theologically sophisticated aspects of classical paganism (Perring 2003). However, it is not always easy to distinguish the deliberate association of compatible aspects of Gnostic and Christian imagery from a more general expression of classical learning (*paideia*) that even Christian elites were expected to maintain in this period (Petts 2003: 116–118).

Pagan influence can also be seen in other aspects of Christian practice. This can be seen clearly in the silver *repoussée* votive leaves that formed an element of the Water Newton hoard. These have strong parallels with votive leaves with overt pagan imagery found elsewhere in Britain (Henig 1993; Painter 1999; Crerar 2006). The practice of depositing such votive offerings found a similar material expression in pagan and Christian practice in Roman Britain. An argument has also been made for wider similarities between pagan and Christian depositional practices in the fourth century (Petts 2002; cf. Fulford 2001). Relationships between Christian and pagan may, of course, also have been tense. Evidence for the destruction of pagan shrines, temples, and statuary in the fourth century has often been related to Christian iconoclasm (for example, the Wallbrook mithraeum: Green 1976: 46; Merrifield 1977: 375). More recently, though, it has been recognized that the evidence for seemingly arbitrary destruction may actually have been more carefully structured and that the fragmentation and preservation of elements of statues may fit into wider attitudes to the preservation and destruction of holy objects (Croxford 2003). While some destruction of pagan sites and objects may have occurred in the context of Christian-on pagan violence, the evidence for complex artefact biographies for much of the cult material is a reminder that there may be other motivations for damaging and dismembering such items. A final dimension to the wider analysis of Christianity in Roman Britain is the need for a better understanding of the extent of regional variation. This needs to encompass a better appreciation of variation in the evidence within Britain, but also a clearer appreciation of how Romano-British Christianity compares with the evidence for the church elsewhere in the Empire in the fourth century. It is now clear that simple cumulative distribution maps, showing the presence of diagnostic Christian material, are not a satisfactory way of mapping the extent of Christianity (Petts 2003: 26–27).

A range of social factors can influence such distributions and maps can mask spatial variability. For example, it is apparent that the majority of hoards with Christian items are found in the East Midlands and East Anglia, whereas the evidence for high-status Christianity, as found on mosaics, is largely found in the south-west. However, in both cases there are complex social processes at play. The south-west of England also has the largest number of late Roman temples, and we are most likely

simply seeing an area where religious belief was expressed through the construction of buildings, whereas in East Anglia and the Midlands there is clearly a long-term tradition of depositing substantial votive hoards (Petts 2003). However, this does not necessarily mean that Christians in the south-west of England were not using silver plate for religious purposes; it may simply never have entered the archaeological record, instead perhaps being recycled. Such variation in religious practice at an intra-provincial level should come as no surprise; nor should the fact that such variation can be recognized between provinces (Petts 2014). For example, the distribution of lead tanks with Christian imagery is almost entirely restricted to Britain, as is the use of peacock imagery on belt-buckles. However, the use of Christian imagery on gravestones is largely a continental phenomenon, and there is a lack of stone sarcophagi bearing distinct Christian symbolism in Britain. There are also similarities between provinces—for example, both Britain and Northern Gaul are largely lacking good archaeological evidence for substantial fourth-century church structures, with little to compare with the more spectacular evidence from further south or east (Petts 2014).

In conclusion, the evidence for Christianity from Roman Britain is not extensive or easy to interpret, although it is useful to remember that it is still the most widely represented individual cult in fourth-century Britain. While it may never have been the dominant religion in terms of numbers, it was clearly adopted by wealthy individuals, many of whom were likely to have been in positions of political and social power. There is still debate over the extent to which this Roman church was the foundation for the rapid blossoming of Christianity in the insular world in the fifth and sixth centuries. However, simply focusing on the 'success' or otherwise of the Roman church should not prevent us from developing a wider understanding of the institution both within and beyond *Britannia*.

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### Abbreviation

*RIB* R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain. Volume I: Inscriptions on Stone*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–to date.

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